

THE PHD DISSERTATION DEFENSE IN CANADA: AN INSTITUTIONAL POLICY PERSPECTIVE¹

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Drawing upon publicly accessible information on the websites of ten Canadian research universities, this paper aims to shed some light on the assumed variation of institutional policies regarding the PhD dissertation defense in Canada. It discusses *How are the institutional policies on the doctoral dissertation defense different across Canadian universities?*; *What do these differences imply about the role, function, and purpose of the oral defense in the PhD examination in Canada?*; and *How might these differences inform PhD education in Canada?*. It concludes with a call for academics and students' awareness of these variations in policy and practice.

Introduction

The dissertation defense is a compulsory component of doctoral assessment processes in most countries (Powell & Green, 2007), and is closely related to the quality assurance of the doctorate (Morley, Leonard & David, 2003). Research in the U.K. has revealed great diversity in this examination both in institutional policy and practice (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; 2002; 2004). In North America, relevant research is very scarce, and no research has been conducted in Canada. This paper looks at the PhD dissertation defense from a policy perspective, aiming to

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shed some light on the assumed variation of Canadian institutional policies regarding this examination. In particular, it addresses the following questions: *How are the institutional policies on the doctoral dissertation defense different across Canadian universities? What do these differences imply about the role, function, and purpose of the oral defense in the PhD examination in Canada? How might these differences inform Canada's PhD education?* While policy has been defined as being more than the text (Ball, 1994; Ozga, 2000; Rein, 1983; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997), I use a narrower definition in this study, which only deals with policy documents, not implementation.

Before looking at the literature, it is important to consider the different PhD examination systems in the world, as system differences influence the focus of the research in different countries. In the U.K., the PhD examination consists of submission of a written dissertation and a private oral defense called a *viva*. In most British universities, only the examiners and the candidate attend the *viva*, though a few universities allow the supervisor to attend, and another few allow other people under certain conditions. In continental Europe, the university press will have published the candidate's dissertation before the defense. The defense thus "has the character of a ceremonial public academic debate" (Swales, 2004, p.147). In Australia, the award of a doctorate usually depends solely on the quality of the written dissertation; only in rare cases (e.g., arts-based doctorates) is a candidate required to attend an oral examination (Dally, Holbrook, Graham & Lawry, 2004). In the U.S. and Canada, the majority of universities require an oral defense of a written dissertation, which is usually open to the public. The same situation exists in most Asian and African countries (Powell & Green, 2007).

Diversity in PhD examination traditions has resulted in different research trends. Being largely private and thus "mysterious," the *viva* has attracted researchers' attention in the U.K. In

contrast, being the sole evidence of scholarship, the written dissertation has been one of the foci in the Australian PhD examination literature. Strangely, though most North American universities require both a written dissertation and an oral defense, little research has been reported on the PhD dissertation examination, and less on the oral defense.

Previous Research

In this section, I present four issues that the literature on PhD dissertation defenses has covered, giving priority to the literature that deals with institutional policies. The four issues are 1) institutional variation, 2) transparency of the examination process, 3) whether the defense is an examination or a discussion, and 4) what is being examined in the defense.

Institutional Variation

Tinkler and Jackson (2000) examined the institutional policies concerning the PhD examination process of 20 British universities, and found three aspects of variation across these institutions: selection of examiners, production and submission of examiners' reports, and conduct of the oral examination. First, although all the universities conceived competency and impartiality as the criteria for selecting examiners, some universities had far more detailed criteria than others, especially the criteria concerning the selection of external examiners. Second, some universities required independent reports from the examiners prior to the defense while others required separate or joint reports after the defense. Time for submission of examiner reports was related to whether the oral defense contributed to the final decision on the award of the degree, and submitting separate or joint reports was linked to the independence of each examiner and thus to the fairness of the overall PhD examination process. Last, while most universities conducted the defense in private, a few had public examinations. These findings,

Tinkler and Jackson argue, indicated the universities conceptualized and operationalized the dissertation defense in diverse ways.

In another study, Tinkler and Jackson (2002) identified three components of the oral defense, namely, skills, content, and conduct. They argue that two of them have “enormous potential for variability” in practice (p.96). That is, policies around content are often vague in what should be assessed, and conduct of this examination is “the least regulated” (p.90).

In the U.S., Swales (2004) notes that the University of California-Berkeley does not require an oral defense while the majority of American universities do. Grimshaw and Burke (1994) mentioned that the institutions in the U.S. had “normative charters of varying degrees of specificity and enforceability” (p.444) concerning the dissertation defense. However, neither study further examined how wide the variation was and its possible implications.

Transparency of the Examination Process

As an “unseen examination” (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, p.174) that is often conducted in private, the British viva has been criticized for its lack of transparency and for not being open to scrutiny (Burnham, 1994, as cited in Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Particularly, Morley, Leonard, and David (2002; 2003) note that the viva “is seldom witnessed/observed by anyone not involved in the examination process, which poses challenges both for monitoring and for researching the assessment process”(pp.268-269). They also point out that British universities often have implicit criteria for selecting examiners, which may result in “collegiality,” a term they used to refer to the informal networks among academics. Collegiality masks complex power relations and may threaten the fairness of the examination process and maintenance of the standards for the doctoral degree. In addition, the confidentiality of examiners’ reports in Britain further mystifies both the examination of the written dissertation and that of the oral defense.

An Examination or a Discussion

Jackson and Tinkler (2001) examined the roles and significance of the viva as reflected in institutional policies, and note that, although the policies indicated the viva was compulsory in the PhD examination in all the institutions examined, some aspects of the policies did not reflect this centrality. For example, the policies lacked clear criteria for the viva, and few institutions could fail students based on their oral performance. Actually, numerous how-to guides downplay the “examination” character of the oral defense. For instance, they claim that the defense is “not to fail the candidate” (Wisker, 2005, p. 315), and the faculty “really want [students] to succeed” (Cone & Foster, 2006, p.307). In particular, Swales (2004) conceptualizes the North American defense as an “academic conversation that operates to certify the candidate’s membership” in a field and “a collective editorial session” that guides the revision of the dissertation (p.169). Research evidence shows that, while many academics think the defense can be *formative* and *celebratory* (Issac, Quinlan & Walker, 1992; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004), students conceive the oral as a *test* that confirms their authorship of the thesis and checks their knowledge in a field (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

What is Being Examined in the Defense

Wisker (2005) argues that the dissertation defense “either confirms the quality of the written work or indicates that there are confusions, ideas and decisions which … need to be further explained and expressed in writing” (p.318). Research indicates that most academics consider the written thesis rather than the oral defense as the evidence for quality of the candidate’s scholarship (Denicolo, 2003). Thus in the defense it is the dissertation that is being examined. However, some researchers contend that what is being examined is the candidate (Powell &

McCauley, 2002). As Fraser and Rowarth (2007) has pointed out, the oral examination is for a university to reassure that a *candidate* “knows what has been done and how it has been done, in depth and in detail” and that *he/she* “deserves to become, and will be, a credible member of the academic community” (p.244).

To summarize, the literature has revealed that the dissertation defense varies across national boundaries, and within a country, differs from university to university. Also, both in policy and in practice, there are debates on the transparency of the examination process, whether the oral defense is an examination, and what is being examined in it. All this implies that further exploration of the PhD dissertation defense is needed, especially in North America, where little research has been conducted in this area.

Methodology

There exists a strong PhD concentration within some institutions in Canada. For example, in 2003, six universities² granted over 50% of the total PhD degrees (Maheu, 2007). Therefore, sampling from the top research universities can lead to more robust conclusions. As education in Canada is the responsibility of provincial governments, the sample should not bias towards certain provinces. These considerations finally resulted in my choosing of ten universities from the top 15 universities in the *Maclean's* 2007 Medical Doctoral Ranking, and from as many provinces as possible (see Table 1). Among these universities, eight belong to the G-13 group³, in which seven belong to the original G-10 group. The sample includes five of the six universities

² They are the University of Toronto, McGill University, University of British Columbia, the Université de Montréal, the University of Alberta, and the Université Laval.

³ The *G-13* or *Group of Thirteen* is a group of leading research-intensive universities in Canada. It was originally formed by ten universities (the *G-10* or *Group of Ten*) as an informal biannual meeting of university executive heads.

mentioned above (marked with an asterisk in Table 1), and consists of nine Anglophone universities and one francophone university.

The universities' online policies regarding the PhD dissertation defense were downloaded and textually analyzed. Relevant segments from the documents were coded and the coded parts of the documents were pasted in a summary table to allow comparison and contrast across the institutions. After repeated reading of both the coded segments and the original documents, five themes emerged on the variation of the institutional policies.

Table 1: Institutions chosen for the study⁴

Institution	Maclean's	Province	G-10/13
University of Alberta*	5	AB	G-10
University of British Columbia*	2	BC	G-10
University of Manitoba	15	MB	n/a
Dalhousie University	8	NS	G-13
Queen's University	2	ON	G-10
University of Toronto*	4	ON	G-10
University of Western Ontario	7	ON	G-10
McGill University*	1	QC	G-10
Université de Montréal*	14	QC	G-10
University of Saskatchewan	11	SK	n/a

* One of the six universities that award 50% of Canada's PhD degrees.

Findings

This section presents the themes in the order of: 1) *Public or Private Defense*, 2) *Purpose of the Defense*, 3) *The Examination Committee*, 4) *Conduct of the Defense*, and 5) *Decision Making*.

⁴ Institutions are listed in alphabetical order of the provinces.

In presenting direct quotes, I use abbreviated names of the universities (e.g., *McGill* for *McGill University*; *UBC* for the *University of British Columbia*) and highlight words by using different fonts in order to direct readers' attention.

Public or Private Defense

All the universities in the study require an oral defense of the dissertation for the award of the PhD degree. Seven universities explicitly state that their oral defenses are public; two (Saskatchewan and Western) do not mention the word *public* in their documents; and one (Toronto) clearly indicates that its final defenses⁵ are private. Among the first group, the degree of openness varies. Four universities (Dalhousie, Manitoba, McGill, and Montréal) have absolutely open defenses. For example:

Dalhousie - All interested faculty, students, and members of the public will be welcome to attend.

On the other hand, Alberta and Queen's have restrictions for attendance of the public:

Alberta - Faculty members of the student's major department as well as members of FGSR⁶ Council (or their alternates) have the right to attend doctoral examinations but should notify the chair of the examining committee. Other persons may attend the defense only with special permission of the Dean, FGSR, or the chair of the examining committee.

Queen's - No student or person other than the regular staff of the University and the Examining Committee may attend the thesis examination of another student unless individual permission from the Chairperson of the Examining Committee has been granted.

UBC, though its documents mention its dissertation defenses are public, does not specify who can attend and whether the attendance is with any condition.

⁵ Some departments require a departmental defense, which is often open to the public. The final defense is the defense required by the School of Graduate Studies.

⁶ Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

Western requires candidates to give a “public lecture” on their thesis research within twenty-four hours before the final oral defense, which is “open to all members of the community.” Probably due to this, the dissertation defense is relatively private. The university document stipulates, “Any member of FGS may attend as a visitor by having a written request to attend approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies seven days before the examination date,” and “[t]he Chair will refuse attendance to all others.” At Saskatchewan, the Candidate’s department decides who can attend a defense; and “other individuals who are not members of the Examining Committee *may or may not* attend the Candidate’s presentation and questioning.”

At Toronto, the final oral examination is private:

The [final oral examination] is a closed examination. Only members of the examination committee and a final oral examination chair may attend the examination. If the candidate wishes to include non-voting members or qualified observers in his/her defense, the department must do so in writing to the Associate Dean of his or her division.

Purpose of the Defense

Three universities (Alberta, Toronto, and Western) do not have explicit descriptions about the purpose of the defense, and the other seven vary in specifications.

Four universities (Manitoba, Montréal, Saskatchewan, and UBC) link the oral defense to standards of the PhD degree, either in general or particular to a university. For example, Manitoba states, “A thorough examination and defense of the thesis serves as the University’s guarantee that the *standards of the Ph.D.* are not only maintained, but strengthened.” Another two universities (Queen’s and Dalhousie) seem to pay more attention to the relationship between the candidate and the examining committee. The Queen’s document says, the defense “marks the first time that the candidate truly expounds on and defends the meaning and significance of his or

her research and knowledge of the discipline to *peers* and *colleagues* alike”; and Dalhousie’s document reads, the oral examination “exposes the work to *scholarly criticism.*” In contrast, McGill light-heartedly claims, “The idea is to engage the committee in an *enjoyable and informative discussion.*”

The Examination Committee

Function. Five universities (McGill, Montréal, Toronto, UBC, and Western) have descriptions of the function of the examining committee, while Toronto focuses mainly on examining the written dissertation:

The Committee must evaluate the external appraisal of the thesis...must examine the candidate on the content and implications of the thesis. ... In addition to determining the adequacy of the thesis, the committee must satisfy itself that the thesis document meets the proper standards of scholarship.

UBC and Western also stress the candidate’s ability to defend it. For example:

Western - The Tasks of the Examiners are to:

- *Determine if the thesis and the candidate meet recognized scholarly standards for the degree*
- *Appraise the thesis for content ...*
- *Appraise the thesis for form ...*
- Evaluate the candidate’s skill and knowledge in responding to questions and defending the thesis
- Ensure authenticity of authorship

McGill and Montréal even suggest examiners consider all aspects of the candidate and his/her work,

McGill - The function of the committee ... is to consider the examiners’ reports, the candidate’s academic record at McGill, the thesis, the candidate’s defense of it, and any other information relevant to the judgement of whether the candidate has achieved the substantial level of creative and critical scholarship necessary for a doctoral degree.

Montréal - Il est du devoir du jury de faire une analyse complète de tous les aspects du travail de l’étudiant, suivie de délibérations basées sur un échange de vues

ouvert et franc de tous ses membres. (La Rédaction et L'évaluation des Mémoires et des Thèses, 2000, p. 26)

Composition. The numbers of the committee members across the ten institutions range from four to seven. All the universities have a chairperson, who moderates the conduct of the defense; and an external examiner, who comes from outside the candidate's university. At all the universities, the supervisor and the co-supervisor are required to attend the defense. However, the composition of the examining committee and the roles of the members vary institutionally. For instance, though all the universities include some supervisory committee members, McGill particularly stipulates that the committee "should not include more than three people including the supervisor(s) who have been actively involved in the supervision of the candidate or as co-authors on any component of the thesis," and when this situation does occur, the committee should "comprise seven members plus the Pro-Dean." At Toronto, the examining committee must include at least one member from the supervisory committee, but no more than three. The committee at Western is composed of two Program Examiners, one University Examiner, and one External Examiner; and except for one of the two Program Examiners, all the examiners should come from outside the candidate's supervisory committee. Alberta stresses "fresh eyes" in the committee. Its document states, "In addition to the external, the committee must have a minimum of one additional arm's length member who comes *new* to the examination (but may have served on the Candidacy examining committee)." Dalhousie requires a departmental representative to serve on the committee as a non-voting member. Similarly, at Montréal the Faculty of Graduate Studies sends a representative to the final oral examination, who is not a member of committee and thus does not vote, to ensure the same standards are applied across the programs at the university.

The Chair. Who can serve as the Chair for the oral defense varies in the universities, though all of them explicitly or implicitly indicate that the supervisor or co-supervisor cannot fulfill this role. At Dalhousie, the chairperson is the Dean/the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, or a member of the Panel of PhD Defense Chairs; at Saskatchewan, the chairperson is the CGSR⁷ Dean or the Dean's Designate. While the Chair must come from *outside* the candidate's program at Western and McGill, he/she should come from the candidate's *home* department at Alberta.

Generally the Chair is the moderator of the oral examination to "ensure that exchanges between the committee and the student are conducted in a productive and mutually respectful manner" (McGill). On the other hand, the universities differ in the Chair's voting roles. Three universities (Manitoba, Montréal, and UBC) do not specify whether the chairperson votes or not; four (Dalhousie, Queen's, Toronto, and Western) indicate that the chairperson cannot vote; Alberta's document stipulates that the Chair votes when he/she is a member of the committee and does not vote if he/she is not. Saskatchewan and McGill are the only universities that indicate the Chair's voting power. And, at McGill his/her (Pro-Dean) vote can be decisive:

In the unlikely event that a consensus is not reached, the Pro-Dean may call for a vote of all members of the committee exclusive of the Pro-Dean. The decision will be made by a simple majority. In the event of a tie, the Pro-Dean has the casting vote.

The external examiner. Eight universities (except Manitoba and Queen's) have criteria for the selection of the external examiner in their online documents, which are competency and impartiality. Six universities (Alberta, Dalhousie, McGill, Montréal, Toronto, and Western) share the definition of competency as being acknowledged experts in the discipline to be examined and having experience of doctoral supervision and/or examination. Seven universities (the previous

⁷ College of Graduate Studies and Research.

six plus Saskatchewan) have statements regarding impartiality, but the stipulations are diverse in length and details. For example, McGill only has one line, saying that the external examiner should come from outside the university and should not have co-authored any component of the thesis, whereas Saskatchewan provides a detailed list:

- *The person has NOT graduated from the academic unit within the last five years.*
- *The person has NOT collaborated with the supervisor of the graduate student*
- *Within the last five years, as demonstrated by shared research grants or by joint authorship of research papers or abstracts of conference presentations.*
- *The faculty member is NOT currently enrolled as a graduate student.*
- *The person is NOT an adjunct professor or associate member or a previous Advisory Committee member from the same department as the supervisor.*
- *[The person] must NOT have been involved with the research project or the preparation of the thesis.*

The chosen universities also vary in the external examiner's presence at the defense. At three universities (McGill, Toronto, and UBC), the external examiner is often absent, while at the other seven (Alberta, Dalhousie, Manitoba, Montréal, Queen's, Saskatchewan, and Western), the external examiner is encouraged to be present, either in person or via technology. For example:

Dalhousie - *Normally the external examiner will attend the defense. The department will make every effort to arrange for alternative facilities (such as video- or teleconferencing) if they are appropriate to provide for the external examiner to participate in the defense even though he/she cannot be there in person.*

At Western, though the external examiner's attendance can be waived, the University suggests teleconferencing. At Montréal, the external examiner normally attends the defense, and when absent, he/she must be represented by another professor who can only represent the views of the examiner as represented in the documents submitted to the Graduate Faculty. A few universities (Alberta and Manitoba) provide travel funds for external examiners.

The power of the external examiner in the evaluation process is diverse as well. At four universities (Alberta, Dalhousie, Saskatchewan, and UBC), the external examiner's opinion on the dissertation significantly influences the committee's final decision. For example,

Saskatchewan – *When the Examining Committee's decision is not unanimous, the majority view shall prevail* provided the External Examiner shares the majority view.

In contrast, the external examiner seems to have less power at Toronto and Montréal. In fact, the “external appraiser”, as thus called at Toronto, does not have to serve as an examiner in the final defense; and the external appraisal of the thesis is “considered only as an individual opinion to be employed as the committee sees fit.” At Montréal, the external examiner’s opinion is not permitted to unduly influence the committee’s decision: “En aucun cas les délibérations d’un jury ne peuvent être paralysées ou invalidées par la position de l’examinateur externe.”

Conduct of the Defense

The general procedure. Overall, the chosen universities share a similar procedure for the PhD dissertation defense, which is, 1) pre-defense meeting of the examining committee, 2) the candidate’s summary presentation of the thesis for 15-30 minutes; 3) questioning session; 4) in-camera discussion about the final grade without the candidate and the audience present; and, 5) calling in the candidate and the audience and announcing of the final result. The order of questioning at the defense is often decided during the pre-defense meeting, as is true at McGill, Toronto, and Western. However, at least five universities (Dalhousie, Manitoba, Queen’s, Saskatchewan, and UBC) stipulate that the external examiner’s questions are entitled to be asked first. For example,

Queen’s - *The examiner external to the university is usually allowed as much time as he or she wishes, which is one reason the external examiner goes first.*

This priority may link to the external examiner’s power over the final decision, as at four of these five universities (except Manitoba), the final decision is significantly influenced by the external examiner’s opinion.

Performance expectations for the candidate. The universities differ in performance expectations for candidates. Three universities (Manitoba, Queen’s, and Toronto) do not have pertinent information; and the other seven, which provide some information, either give mixed messages or lack precision. For example, McGill’s instructions say that candidates’ “grasp of related subjects may … be *tested*,” and their answers to questions should be “concise.” However, a few lines later, the instructions continue that “the idea is to engage the Committee in *an enjoyable and informative discussion*,” which implies the oral defense is less formal than an examination. Alberta claims that the oral defense is to test “for evidence of education, not just training,” but nowhere in the document is “education” or “training” clearly defined.

Decision Making

Release of examiners’ reports to the candidate. Nine of the ten universities indicate that the examiners’ reports (from internal and/or external examiners) cannot be released to the candidate prior to the oral defense. The exception is Toronto, whose web page says, “It is U of T policy that all Ph.D. candidates will receive their external appraisal, or external examiners report, two weeks prior to the examination date.”

Final decision on the examination. The universities vary in how the final decision is made. Five universities (Alberta, McGill, Saskatchewan, UBC, and Western) make final decisions by majority vote. Among them, three (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and UBC) stipulate that the external examiner must share the majority view. UBC provides solutions when the external

examiner is not with the majority: “the Chair’s report to the Dean should record the recommendation of each committee member.” In contrast, Western does not seem to require the external examiner to share the majority view: “If the majority of the Examiners find that each of the thesis content, thesis form, and the oral defence are acceptable, the candidate passes the Thesis Examination.” At McGill, “the Pro-Dean may call for a vote of all members of the committee exclusive of the Pro-Dean. The decision will be made by a simple majority. In the event of a tie, the Pro-Dean has the casting vote.”

Two universities (Manitoba and Queen’s) make final decisions by unanimous vote. However, their stipulations diversify. For example, unanimity seems to be more strictly applied at Manitoba than at Queen’s:

Manitoba - *Decisions to pass the candidate must be unanimous, that is, a decision that is less than unanimous must be reported as a failure.*

Queen’s - *unanimous decisions are usually reached, however, if the committee returns two or more votes for referral it may hold another examination after the candidate has carried out further research and/or rewritten the thesis.*

At Toronto, two or more negative votes from the examiners for the first defense will result in adjournment:

The candidate passes on the first examination:

- a) *if the decision is unanimous, OR*
- b) *if there is not more than one negative vote or abstention. If there is more than one negative vote or abstention, adjournment is mandatory.*

Montréal has a more complex decision making system. Generally, the final decision is made by unanimous vote. A non-unanimous view may lead to the organization of a second committee or a clear fail depending on whether the committee is the first one:

Après délibération, le jury peut arriver à l’une des conclusions suivantes suite à la soutenance:

1. *Acceptation unanime de la thèse*

2. *Acceptation non unanime ou refus majoritaire de la thèse*

Premier jury. Suite à cette recommandation, le doyen de la FES procède normalement à la nomination d'un deuxième jury qui reprendra l'évaluation de la thèse.

Deuxième jury. Cette recommandation met fin à la candidature de l'étudiant.

3. *Refus unanime de la thèse*

Cette recommandation met fin à la candidature de l'étudiant.

Outcome categories. The ten universities are diverse in whether they have outcome categories for the oral defense. Four universities (Dalhousie, Toronto, UBC, and Western) only have outcome categories for the dissertation. For instance, Toronto's pass grades include "as it stands," "minor corrections," and "minor modifications." In contrast, the other universities distinguish the assessment of the oral defense from that of the written dissertation. For example, Alberta's document defines the "adjourned" grade as, "The committee is dissatisfied with the candidate's oral presentation and defense of the thesis, even if the thesis itself is acceptable with or without minor revisions."

Discussion

Transparency of the Examination Process

This study reveals that the ten Canadian universities vary in degree of openness of the PhD oral defense. While six have public defenses, four have private or relatively private ones. This finding counters what is often assumed in the U.K. literature that the North American dissertation defenses are more public (see Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Publicity is related to transparency of the examination process (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). In this sense, not all Canadian dissertation defenses are transparent. As a result, students at universities conducting private dissertation

defenses may be less informed about this examination than those at universities having a more open system.

Secondly, similar to what the literature has revealed (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), the universities differ in details of the criteria for the choice of the external examiner, especially regarding *impartiality*. Some universities appear to have clearer specifications, which lead to a more transparent selection of an external examiner. As external examiners are meant to *gatekeep* a discipline by maintaining standards across institutions (Jackson & Tinkler, 2000), questions arise about the possibility of selecting an “un-impartial” external examiner due to less transparent specifications, who may not successfully fulfill the gatekeeping role.

Thirdly, while nine universities do not release examiners’ reports to candidates until after the defense, University of Toronto releases external examiner’s reports to candidates prior to the defense. Although there is no evidence showing the latter mechanism, seemingly more transparent, may enhance students’ performance in the defense (see Powel & McCauley, 2003), the variation itself reminds us of the value of rethinking the transparency of the Canadian PhD examination process.

An Examination or a Discussion

The literature questions whether the U.K. defense is an examination in its own right (e.g., Denicolo, 2003; Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). This study indicates a similar issue exists in Canada. While all the universities require an oral defense for the award of the doctorate, they seem to conceptualize the defense in various ways. Some conceive it as an examination to maintain standards of the PhD degree (e.g., Manitoba), some conceive it as a peer-review experience for the candidate (e.g., Queen’s), and a few conceive it as an informal

academic discussion (e.g., McGill). Also, if the oral defense is an examination, there should be outcome categories independent of those for the dissertation (even *pass* and *fail*). However, only six universities have grades for the oral performance. These conceptualizations seem to echo Swales' (2004) idea that the North American dissertation defense, although it maintains "an examination aspect," may function more as "a high-level editorial committee meeting" (p.170).

What is Being Examined in the Defense

This study reveals that the universities differ in their conceptualization regarding what is examined in the defense. This is reflected in the universities' diverse descriptions of the function of the examination committee. Some universities' emphasize the examination of the written dissertation (e.g., Toronto) while others stress the examination of all aspects of the candidate (e.g., McGill) or his/her oral performance (e.g., Western). Additionally, lack of performance expectations may be confusing for students, and clearer guidelines could be helpful in familiarizing students with the format of the examination.

The absence of the external examiner in the final oral defense at some universities further complicates this issue, as an absent external examiner only examines the written dissertation, not the defense. Although this absence could have been understandable in the past for cost considerations, technologies today make this less a consideration. As the study has revealed, some universities already use technology to ensure the presence of the external examiner. Other institutions might consider doing so as well.

Other Variations and Questions

First, some universities have more academics on the examination committee and some have fewer. How does the composition of the examination committee influence the conduct of the defense and student experiences? For instance, some universities include non-voting committee members (e.g., Dalhousie) or a non-voting academic representing the Graduate Studies Office (e.g., Montréal). How do these measures influence the fairness of questioning and the atmosphere of the defense? Also, who can serve as the Chair and whether the Chair can vote vary across the universities. What differences, in terms of conduct of the defense, does it make to have a Chair from outside the candidate's program (e.g., Western, McGill) and one from the candidate's program (e.g., Alberta)? How does this influence student experiences?

Second, in Canada, the external examiner tends to have less power in deciding whether a candidate can be awarded a PhD degree than in the U.K., where the external examiner often decides whether a candidate can get the degree or not (see Joyner, 2003; Jackson & Tinkler, 2000). However, at some universities (e.g., UBC), his/her opinion still significantly affects the final decision of the examination committee; and at five universities the external examiner's questions are entitled to be asked first. Thus questions arise about why the external examiner's opinion is treated differently in different institutions, and how different orders of questioning make a difference to student experiences and the outcomes, considering the external examiner's expertise in the candidate's field.

Last, whether the defense is private or public provokes other thoughts. A completely public oral defense can be a social event bonding a local departmental community with a wider world. It also delivers valuable information to graduate students within the department about what the doctorate means. Attending others' oral defenses is part of a graduate student's academic

socialization. In contrast, a closed oral defense mystifies this examination, leaving students wondering what to expect.

Conclusion

This study examined the institutional policies of ten Canadian universities regarding the PhD dissertation defense, focusing on variation at the policy level. It has limitations due to a small sample size, and the facts that the policies I consulted may not reflect the actual practice of the chosen universities, that there may be “supplementary regulations” that are not publicly accessible (at least not available online), and that candidates and academics may not actually refer to the online documents that only give relatively general information regarding the dissertation defense. Therefore, although this paper addresses institutional policies, it only tells a partial story. There is obviously a large space for future research. However, it raises questions regarding the transparency, role, function, and purpose of the PhD dissertation defense in Canada, and how variation in policy may indicate further variation in practice. The result of the analysis is not to argue for a consistent set of policies across higher education institutions, since variation across academic departments and programs is the norm both in policy and practice. However, I do argue that awareness of the variation is important for both academics and students.

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University Websites Regarding Dissertation Defense Policies

University of Alberta: <http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/examsconvo/docexams.htm>;
<http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/eight.htm>

University of British Columbia: <http://www.grad.ubc.ca/students/oralexams/index.asp?menu=001,008,000,000>

University of Manitoba: http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/thesis/phdoegi.html

Dalhousie University: <http://www.dalgrad.dal.ca/regulations/ix/#9.6>

Queen's University: [http://www.queensu.ca/sgs/Currentstudents/Completingyourdegree/
Preparingyouroralexam.html](http://www.queensu.ca/sgs/Currentstudents/Completingyourdegree/Preparingyouroralexam.html)

University of Toronto: <http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/current/phdexams/index.asp>

University of Western Ontario: <http://grad.uwo.ca/calendar.htm>

McGill University: <http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/current/programs/thesis/guidelines/oral/>

Université de Montréal: [http://www.fesp.umontreal.ca/etudiants_actuels/
memoire_these.html](http://www.fesp.umontreal.ca/etudiants_actuels/memoire_these.html)

University of Saskatchewan: <http://www.usask.ca/cgsr/defenserules.php>